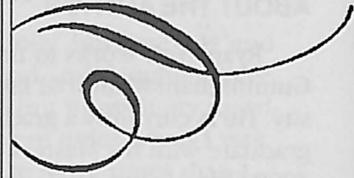# HOW 'YA GONNA KEEP 'EM DOWN ON THE FARM---THE PROBLEM OF RETENTION

by Mary Stanley

The following article is part of a series written by Mary Stanley. The series, an outcome of her recent sabbatical, focuses on HR issues in libraries and will continue to be featured in upcoming issues of *Indiana Libraries*.

-Editor-

INTRODUCTION

The old song that was written in the wake of America's entry into World War I, "How Ya Gonna Keep 'Em Down on the Farm?", speaks to the problem of keeping good employees. Libraries spend an enormous amount of time and money in the recruitment process to attract and hire talented professionals. Many of these same talented professionals move on to another position in a short time. How can libraries retain and keep these individuals? Let's look at a few facts about the changing face of the library profession.

The American Library Association (ALA) estimates that only 7 percent of librarians are currently ages twenty to twenty-nine (Lynch, 2002). ALA also projects that nearly sixty percent of current librarians will reach retirement age by 2025 (Lynch). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the United States will have 10 million more jobs than people by 2010. In addition, less than half of all Americans are satisfied with their jobs (Bufe & Murphy, 2004). These figures alone present quite a dilemma for the future of library staffing levels. If organizations are truly serious about solving this dilemma, developing an effective retention strategy is an investment that would pay for itself in the long run (Singer & Goodrich, 2006).

LACK OF RETENTION AND ASSOCIATED COSTS

A survey done in 1998 reported that 75 percent of executives placed employee retention as one of their top priorities, yet only 15 percent had any plan in place to reduce turnover (Fishman, 1998). This suggests that management still perceives turnover as part of doing business.

The Saratoga Institute estimates the average cost of losing an employee to be an equivalent of that employee's annual salary (Branham, 2005). The cost of replacing an employee is often underestimated because in addition to visible costs of recruiting, there are hidden costs and consequences of turnover. They include disruption of customer services, the vacancy cost until the position is replaced, costs resulting from the disruption of work flow, and the decline of morale and stability of those who remain and who are often asked to pick up the slack. Further, along with the recruitment costs are the cost in training the new employee and the loss of service until the new employee achieves the needed job skills and attains maximum efficiency (Abbasi & Hollman, 2000).

WHY GOOD EMPLOYEES LEAVE

First of all, we need to address the issue of "why" talented individuals leave an organization. We cannot hope to keep all of our valued talent, but we must try to understand why good people leave, especially if it could have been prevented. It is strategically important for organizations to learn why individuals leave, how to change the organization's behavior to correct this, and how to engage and keep re-engaging talented employees. An employee's intention to leave doesn't just happen overnight. There is usually a period of disengagement. Disengagement is a process that may take days, weeks, months, or even years before the individual makes the final decision to leave. The obvious warning signs that disengagement has started include absenteeism, tardiness, or any behavior that indicates withdrawal or increased negativity. Oftentimes, there is one event that pushes the limit on the disengaged individual to cross the line into leaving the organization. In a survey done by Saratoga Institute, 89 percent of managers believe that employees leave for more money when in reality 88 percent of employees leave for reasons other than money (Branham, 2005). Branham found these events, not for want of a higher salary, triggered disengagement:

- Being passed over for promotion

- Realizing the job is not as promised

- Learning they may be transferred

- Being asked to do something unethical

- An incident of sexual harassment or racial discrimination

- A conflict with a co-worker

- An unexpectedly low performance rating

In looking at these possible events for disengagement, most of them express emotion tied to the cause of disengagement. Saratoga Institute interviewed and received comments from 3,149 employee who voluntarily left their employment (Davidson & Fitz-enz, 1997). There were 67 reasons taken from the exit survey responses and when the unpreventable reasons (better-paying job, career change, commuting distance, job elimination, retirement, and spouse relocation to name a few) were removed, there were still 47 preventable reasons for voluntary turnover. Most reasons expressed the emotions of disappointment, frustration, anger, disillusionment, resentment, and betrayal, again, emphasizing the powerful impact that strong emotions can have on employee behavior and engagement.

Another factor that influences turnover is the organizational tendency to continue managing for yesterday's conditions. The workplace and way of doing business is shifting to a new look and attitude. The workforce composition is very different from a decade ago. In today's world of changing technology and work patterns, employees want to feel involved and empowered and cannot be managed as subordinates (Abbasi & Hollman, 2000). In much of the retention literature, employees want more than just a job and a paycheck. They want to be involved in organization decisions, be able to demonstrate their talent, have an opportunity to develop and advance, and manage their own work time. Employees of today want to be recognized for their contributions and have a sense of purpose within the organization. Lack of recognition has been attributed as the number one reason people leave their jobs (Middlebrook, 1999).

WHY EMPLOYEES STAY

Why do employees stay with an employer? Some of the reasons that have been cited include: the employee feels valued; the employee feels connected and feels he/she makes a difference; the employee has opportunities for personal and professional growth; the work environment promotes continuous learning; good management; and, fair pay and benefits (Singer & Goodrich, 2006). Reviewing these reasons should be the first step in planning a retention program for your organization

Let's start with the new employee that you have just hired. Building and maintaining commitment among employees is a process that should begin before their recruitment and end only after their retirement. The time to begin the retention process is when that

individual has accepted the position. Do you maintain contact with the individual during the time between acceptance and the first day on the job? Keeping in contact with these individuals lets them know that the organization cares about its new employees. If they are moving from another place, offer potential housing opportunities or information about the community. Some authors suggest offering to help them unload their belongings when the moving van arrives (Weingart, Kochan, & Hedrick, 1998). This might not be feasible in every situation, but, when possible, it does indicate to the new employee that there is support and care in the new organization.

Make sure that the new employee's work station or office is ready; have the area presentable and complete with supplies. Make sure that the supervisor is available on the first day to greet and welcome the new employee. In addition to completing paperwork, etc., the employee should be given computer and e-mail instructions and telephone protocols for answering and making calls. Give the new employee a tour of the library, especially the break room and lavatory, and introduce staff members.

In many organizations, the first week of orientation for a new employee involves time meeting with other departments within the library to learn how their areas operate and the impact or interaction they might have with the new employee. This provides a sense of the culture of the organization and the reporting lines. One orientation that is often neglected but important as well is the emergency and disaster procedures for the organization (Weingart, Kochan, & Hedrich, 1998). This discussion opens the opportunity to talk about other policies and procedures that might be important for the new employee to learn. The supervisor should discuss the expected work schedule for the new employee, break times, and other daily routines. This is also the time to review policies on vacation, sick days, bereavement, and how this is recorded. The new employee will also want to know about pay distribution and when that occurs.

It is important to listen to new employees during the orientation period as well. Find out what their career goals are and ask how as a supervisor you can help them reach those goals. In this discussion, you might be able to ascertain what their training needs are and what training they have already achieved. Try to determine what they value in an organizational structure and what matters to them. Knowing these things might help retain new, talented employees.

Many libraries and organizations use a mentoring program with all of their new employees. There have been several approaches to this aspect of new employee orientation. In one library, a peer-level staff from another area is assigned to a new employee

(Davis, 1994). This allows for interaction among the various library units and provides the opportunity to understand the relationship between the areas. Some organizations and libraries assign a more experienced staff member who serves as a resource for the new employee. And some let the new employee self-elect their mentor depending on the rapport that has been established between the two individuals.

There are mixed reviews in the library literature on the effect of mentoring (Munde, 2000). Much of the misunderstanding about mentoring stems from a lack of definition of what mentoring actually means. Part of this comes from the mentor who does not live up to the expectations of his/her role. The mentor may meet with the employee once or twice and consider the job complete. Expectations should be clearly defined for the mentor so that the experience will be useful and encouraging for the new employee.

One corporation, Plante & Moran, assigns each new staff member a "buddy" and a team partner (Bufe & Murphy, 2004). The buddy has three to five years experience and serves as a big brother or sister to help the new employee become oriented. The buddy is available to answer questions and offer advice. These individuals are trained in the process of how to serve as buddy for the system. The team partner takes the mentor role. They are responsible for career coaching and planning and performance evaluations. Thus, all new staff members, once aboard, have two individuals assigned to them which helps build staff loyalty and morale (Bufe & Murphy). This firm has kept its annual turnover rate between 8 percent and 15 percent over the last decade which is about half that of the industry average for large firms. The results that they achieved in this process were higher staff morale, better teamwork, and lower turnover (Bufe & Murphy).

As the new employee becomes acclimated to the organization, additional tasks will be added as the employee masters previous ones. The supervisor needs to continue dialogue with the employee and determine how the employee is handling his/her assignments at this point. As new tasks or responsibilities are given, training might also need to be provided to ensure the employee's success. Staff development should continue throughout the employee's tenure with the organization.

Feedback should be given to employee at 30, 60, and 90 day intervals at the least. Some institutions use a 90/90 review based on the philosophy that a manager should spend at least 90 minutes every 90 days working individually with employees. This time is spent reviewing an employee's accomplishments over the last 90 days, the setting of goals for the next 90 days, and a determination of what steps and/or training is needed

to accomplish these goals. This contact keeps everyone focused, and there are no surprises at review time. The one drawback to this process is the time involved by supervisors and managers in meeting with each of their staff members every ninety days. IUPUI (Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis) University Library, a team-based organization, tried this approach but eventually dropped to meeting on a quarterly basis. Since this change was not mandatory, some teams are not consistent on the use of the latter approach.

Cross-training is another approach and provides several benefits. Cross-training allows the employees to become more familiar with co-workers and with the organizational process as a whole. Cross-training also provides the trained employees to assist each other when necessary. This again takes time from other work responsibilities but in the long run can be beneficial for the employees and the organization.

One of the biggest mistakes that an organization can make is to forget employees once they are trained and effectively working in the organization. Building and maintaining employee commitment should continue through until retirement, although many employees will not stay with an organization until they retire. Employee loyalty and job security currently are at a low ebb, and employers must be responsive to workforce needs and expectations.

Fair compensation systems and benefits, professional and personal growth, involvement in the decision-making process, stimulating challenges, and individual performance recognition are all areas of the work experience that impact whether an employee leaves or stays (Singer & Goodrich, 2006). Throughout the literature on retention, researchers are finding that retaining employees depends largely on four key elements:

- Attractive compensation benefits,

- A supportive work environment,

- Opportunities for career development and/or advancement,

- And flexibility to meet work/life demands. (Messmer, 2006)

HOW LIBRARIES CAN RETAIN EMPLOYEES

How can libraries provide the kind of environment that aids staff retention? Library employees want to be involved, to be fairly compensated for their work, to have a positive work environment, to have needed resources to do their job, to have open lines of communication, to be recognized for a job well done, to have career development opportunities, and to be allowed flexibility within their job.

Involvement

This all sounds wonderful but how can the traditional library provide a supportive, positive working environment? Involvement is a key part of a good working environment. Involve the staff in the decision-making process and seriously consider all input. This not only tells the employees that their thoughts and suggestions are valued but it also holds them accountable when decisions are made. Employees want a sense of belonging and security.

Compensation

What about compensation and how libraries can compete with other organizations? First of all, review the market and see what the competitors are offering. A 2005 survey conducted by the research firm, Zogby International, found that 58 percent of employees they polled preferred a job with excellent benefits over one with a higher salary (Messmer, 2006). The wide spread of employees over several generation types make it impossible to have a one-size fits all benefit package. Many organizations are offering flexible or cafeteria benefits which give employees a menu of choices.

Experts discourage hiring at the maximum as this causes problems for internal salary equity and salary range considerations at review time. Base salary should be determined on the skill level, experience, and educational requirements for the position.

Benefits that are great incentives include travel or funding for professional development, paid time for attending work related conferences/workshops, tuition reimbursement, and paid holidays. A choice in healthcare plans and retirement programs are also major benefits for all employees. Some of this will be more difficult for smaller libraries but is certainly worth checking into for the retention of your good employees.

Work environment

How does the work environment connect to the retention of employees? All employees want a positive, supporting work environment. Many job applicants put this near the top of their list of "wants" when comparing and evaluating organizations (Messmer, 2006).

What does a positive supportive work environment mean? All employees want to feel valued and recognized for their contributions to the workplace. One text goes as far as to define the workspace into two realms, the inner space and the outer space (Kaye & Jordan-Evans, 2005). Inner space is defined as the mental and emotional space employees want and need to feel like creative, productive members of the team. Outer space refers to the physical world and, narrowed down, would include the work area and the freedom to make it one's own (Kaye & Jordan-Evans). Outer space, according to these authors, would also include allowing employees to determine their own work schedule and allowing them to work from different places. Telecommuting is becoming more and more visible in the working world, and one researcher found that it is rarely abused because the individuals feel telecommuting is a privilege they wouldn't want to lose (Oldman, 1998).

On the other hand, a toxic work environment, perceived or real, says to employees that they are not assets to the organization but merely monetary considerations. This will eventually translate into low morale, declining loyalty, and disengagement on the part of the employee.

Review the following questions. If you answer yes to any of them, your organization may be promoting a toxic work environment for your employees.

- Does your organization require people to choose between having a life and a career?
- Does the organization treat people as if they were a factor of production?
- Does the organization look at its employees and see costs, salaries, benefits, and overhead?

Providing needed resources

Providing the tools and resources that all staff need to do their job efficiently and effectively is equally important. In our ever-changing technology world of today, it is important to make sure that staff members have the necessary tools to keep up in the electronic environment.

Communication

Another critical component of the positive, supportive work environment is communication. More times than not when staff members are asked what needs to be improved in the organization, the answer is communication. Management often says, "Well, I send them emails every day," or, "I sent them the minutes of the management or leadership group." While technology has done wonders for the workplace, communication has declined. Communication involves not only the written word and e-mail messages but also one-on-one conversations and active listening. Plante & Moran, in addition to their buddy system and team mentor program, have a program called the "Breakfast Club" (Bufe & Murphy, 2004). Once a month, one of the management staff hosts a breakfast with a small group of staff (maximum of 3). There is no agenda and it can be as simple as a "getting-to-know-you" session or a question and answer meeting. All levels of staff are included and more than 600 staff members have attended these meetings over the past five years (Bufe & Murphy). This is just another example of putting communication to work to improve the work environment.

Employee recognition

Another aspect of a positive work environment is recognizing employee contributions. Hank Harris, president and managing director of a construction industry management consultant firm says, "Too many employees leave because they never get proper recognition for what they've accomplished" (Harris, 2006). Employees want to feel good about themselves and their work, have a sense of purpose, and be recognized when they do their jobs well. Too many times, organizations will recognize and applaud the work of a special project or new initiative and forget to commend the grunt workers who keep the organization going during the same time as the special project. This is frustrating and demeaning to those employees who begin to feel that they are not valued or play any part in the success of the organization. Employers must seek out ways to acknowledge each and every employee for the contributions they make.

Some supervisors are better at giving praise than others. Those who have difficulty doing this would rather forego it than be viewed as insincere. However, it is a huge mistake to not praise your staff. Some value such recognition more than money. The relationships between a supervisor and a subordinate may be a key issue in the retention of that employee. According to Peter Drucker (1998), "...one does not 'manage' people as previously assumed. One leads them" (p. 166).

Career development

The opportunity for career development or personal growth is another key aspect of retention of good employees. Career development may mean different things to different employees. Younger employees may benefit more by the acquisition of new skills and experiences. For older workers nearing retirement, the opportunity to teach or mentor might be a more preferred form of career development. Supporting career development offers challenges to the employee that has proven to be important in loyalty and retention (Singer & Goodrich, 2006).

Flexibility

A final element of importance in retention is developing flexibility to balance work and personal demands. Many employees struggle to find a healthy balance between personal and professional responsibilities. In one survey it was found that flexible scheduling is the benefit most valued by employees (Messmer, 2006).

What are some ways to create an environment that tries to balance both work and life? Employers may need to think outside of the box when trying to determine this balance. Instead of viewing work in the terms of "working hours" such as 8 to 5, focus on what needs to be accomplished. Does the work need to be completed only onsite during regular business hours? Sometimes providing flexible work schedules or job sharing allows alternatives that satisfy both the organizational needs and the employee needs. Libraries are not the space-confined organizations of the past. With the technology explosion, libraries are doing things much differently than in past decades.

Flexibility means different things to the different generations of today (Kaye & Jordan-Evans, 2005). For the mature staff, they feel that they have earned flexibility. They want to spend more time with their grandchildren, take more vacations, and test the retirement aspect that they are facing. The baby boomers want flexibility to balance their life—time to spend with their children, their aging parents, and their grandchildren. They also want to explore the world and visit new places. The X-ers feel that they deserve flexibility. They want to do the work their way and be able to choose between time off and personal enrichment, perhaps through expanding their education. The Y generation expects flexibility, too. They want to take sabbaticals to live somewhere else for a year and gain new experiences. They want the freedom of going to extended lunches with their colleagues and returning to work at their leisure. Reasons for wanting adaptable schedules may vary among age groups, but the basic rule is that they all want flexibility in their work life.

Employers should appreciate the problems of child care or elder care and what impact this has on talented employees. Recognize the diversity of personal values and priorities and demonstrate an acceptance of this diversity. Today's management requires ingenuity and wisdom to a greater degree than at any other time in work history.

CONCLUSION

Kaye and Jordan-Evans (2005), authors of *Love'em or Lose'em: Getting Good People to Stay*, use four key words to convey their message regarding retention. Here's how they are using those words—

- Love – Treat employees fairly and respectfully. Thank them. Challenge and develop them. Care about them and you will engage and retain them.

- Lose – Loss is just as serious when talent retires on the job as when they leave to join a competitor.

- Good – Consider your solid citizens, not just your high potentials. Stars are people at any level who bring value to the organization

- Stay – Encourage talented employees to stay with the enterprise (if not your own department). Talent will be the key differentiating factor in the competitive battle ahead. (p. xiii)

Even if you have made every effort to create a positive work environment, employees will leave the organization. Exit interviews can provide invaluable information, especially if an employee leaves for another library system. Employees leaving the organization are more likely to be honest with you than current employees. You can use the results of the exit interviews to determine whether or not there are underlying problems that cause individuals to leave the organization. Use these interviews to build a strategy for improved retention. Retention strategies must be designed in such a way that employees know what they need to do and what is expected of them, so that they:

Are involved in the decision-making processes;

Have opportunities to learn and grow;

Are recognized for good performance;

Are held accountable for the work that they do.

Given the current difficulty in recruiting and hiring qualified workers, it's far better to keep talented employees for as long as possible.

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